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ABSTRACT

BOTH THE POTENTIAL AND THE LIMITATIONS OF RADIO FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION ARE DESCRIBED, AS WELL AS ITS RELEVANCE FOR STUDENTS OF DIFFERENT PROFICIENCY LEVELS. THE AUTHOR'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCES SERVE AS THE BASIS FOR RECOMMENDATION OF A SIX-BAND, SHORTWAVE, QUALITY RECEPTION TABLE AND A LISTING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE SHORTWAVE BROADCASTS EMANATING FROM FRANCE, THE UNITED STATES, CANADA, AND SWEDEN. A CASE IS MADE FOR THE SUITABILITY OF RADIO AS AN AID IN THE MAINTENANCE OF COMPREHENSION IN AN ACADEMIC SITUATION. THE VALUES FOR THE LANGUAGE LEARNER OF TRANSMITTING, AS WELL AS RECEIVING, ARE OUTLINED. SOME REASONS FOR THE LIMITED USE OF RADIO ARE ALSO DISCUSSED. (RL)

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USING RADIO TO DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN COMPETENCE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

by

Robert J. Nelson

At the outset of this discussion of the potential and the limitations of radio in foreign language training, I should like to call attention to three major points on which I shall elaborate in the following pages:

(1) There is a paucity of published research on the use of radio in foreign language teaching which has obliged me to base much of this article on my own experiences with radio.

(2) For the normal, academic situation, radio is more useful to maintain than to develop comprehension in a foreign language.

(3) In radio, the receiver can also be a sender, so there is no need to limit the uses of the medium to "listening" alone.

1.

The use of radio in foreign language training has been neglected. Thus, though radio is almost as old as this century, two articles by William N. Felt must, in spite of their fairly recent vintage (1953 and 1961), be considered pioneering efforts.[1] In fact, I came upon Mr. Felt's work only after "discovering" radio on my own. In 1965 I felt the need for more experience in hearing Portuguese, a language which I had begun to teach myself. For about $100 I purchased a table set which gave worldwide reception over the six most frequently used short-wave bands, the broadcast (A.M.) band and the long-wave band. Naturally, I have used the short-wave bands most often, although A.M. radio has also provided useful foreign language experience. My experience is probably typical only of large urban centers like Philadelphia, where I resided from 1965 to 1969, the period on which this report is based.

I have found the following pattern of quality in reception to be fairly consistent:

BAND	FREQUENCY	MORNING	AFTERNOON	EVENING
49M	5.9–6.3	good	poor	good
31M	8.6–10	poor	fair	good
25M	11.7–12	poor	fair	good
19M	14.6–15.4	fair	good	poor
16M	16.4–18	good	fair	poor
13M	21.5–22	good	fair	poor

For example, reception of "France-Inter" (8:00 A.M.-2:00 P.M. on 13 meter band; 2:00 P.M.-6:00 P.M. on 19 meter band in Philadelphia) has been as clear and strong as local A.M. broadcasts by the major American broadcasting systems. There is some drifting, of course. However, if the receiver is equipped with a bandspread, an occasional minor manipulation will help to maintain strength and clarity of reception. (A bandspread is a

discriminating device, operated by a dial, for tuning out other transmissions that interfere, or for recapturing a drifting transmission.)

Users of radio in other time zones must make adjustments not only for times of reception, but also for regional atmospheric and topographical features. These features may also change frequencies and times of transmission by national radio systems. (Political events sometimes change them, too.) Those interested should write to the nearest cultural attache of any given country for information about its National Radio, or consult the various radio publications available at bookstores. For more general information write to the American Radio Relay League, Administrative Headquarters, Newington, Connecticut.

I have listened chiefly to French news and documentary programs; Portuguese news and documentary programs from Portugal, Brazil, and other countries as well (the latter chiefly in Brazilian Portuguese); and elementary Swedish from Radio Sweden. Here are some examples, with their times and locations (given by meter bands rather than specific frequencies, because the latter tend to be less constant, and fiddling with the dial is usually necessary):

France

13 meter band	8:00 A.M. to 10:00. The news of the day, international and national, plus commentary; popular music; sports (Rugby on Sundays). In French.
19 meter band	Afternoon and early evening. News and many dramatizations (plays, novels, etc.) and cultural discussions.
16 meter band	Late evening in Portuguese. News, etc.

United States

25 meter band	The news of the day; social commentary; popular music; etc. I have listened to broadcasts in Spanish and Portuguese. The Portuguese broadcast (5-7 P.M.) has an unusual feature which can be adapted for language training at early stages of learning: the news is broadcast at dictation speed (for copying in backlands of Brazil). Programs available from the United States Information Agency, Washington, D.C.
A.M. Broadcast	In Philadelphia, WTEL (860 KH_Z) broadcasts all afternoon in Spanish, Monday to Friday; in Italian from 12-1, Monday to Friday, and 12-1 on Sunday.

Canada

25 meter ban	In Portuguese in the early evening: news, cultural affairs (Brazilian Portuguese).
A.M. Broadcast	In Philadelphia, Monday to Friday, at 860 KH_Z, a regular transmission in French from Canada can be heard – news, social-political-cultural comment, etc.

Sweden

19 meter band In Swedish pre-dawn hours.

13 meter band In Swedish mid-morning (N.B. "Swedish-by-Radio," an elementary language course is broadcast once a week. A textbook was available in 1967 from Radio Sweden, Box 955, Stockholm 1).

In addition, I have often listened to English language broadcasts from Switzerland, Russia, Cuba, East Germany, France, South Africa, etc. At the early stages of learning, English language broadcasts from target language countries often provide a means of adding cultural background of current or idiosyncratic interest to that found in the standard materials used in our schools. Naturally, for the advanced stages, the same kind of material is available in the target language. Target language broadcasts can also help to enlarge the student's range of expression beyond the belletristic limits of standard foreign language courses.

In many parts of the continental United States you can get good reception of French from Canada and Spanish from Mexico over regular A.M. and F.M. broadcast stations at many hours of the day on reasonably inexpensive home radios. In or near major population centers, the number of foreign languages you can hear over regular stations is quite impressive. Furthermore, the quality of Canadian French or Mexican Spanish or Philadelphia Italian or New York German is by no means necessarily inferior to the "standard" dialects of the languages used as model and goal in the average academic program. True, there is often some contamination of the foreign language and English (and possibly some arrestation, both linguistically and culturally). However, many of these stations use "voices" that are "plus royalistes que le roi," and their programs on the culture of the mother country are far more timely and well informed than the textbooks used in many academic programs. As a resource for maintaining listening skills and for expanding cultural awareness, radio has worked well both for me and students to whom I have recommended its use. Why has it been so little used by other teachers and students?

It is true that in most broadcasts the foreign language is spoken too fast for beginners to comprehend. However, this fact explains only in small part our failure to exploit radio as a learning resource. After all, radio programs could have been developed expressly for the teaching of language at the elementary stage. (Some foreign countries do broadcast such programs via short-wave – Radio Sweden, for example.) But the language-teaching programs developed for television have been conspicuously unsuccessful – especially with foreign language teachers.

Cynics claim that teachers have responded so negatively because they fear technological unemployment. In my opinion, a more significant reason is that foreign language programs at all levels are script-oriented and, within that orientation, largely belletristic. Teachers in such programs are reluctant to trust radio, TV, language laboratories, or any other technology on a large scale, though some are prepared to use them as adjuncts – for poetry and play readings, etc. But even this use is infrequent.

One might expect more awareness of the potential of radio from teachers imbued with "audiolingualism." However, among such teachers, there is a debilitating assumption at work–that the "lingual" is far more important than the "audio." A general cultural

pattern is also reflected here: Americans are basically a pragmatic people – doers and talkers rather than spectators and listeners. It is not surprising, then, that many audiolingualists are impatient to get to the supposedly more "active" skill of speaking. Yet, as Simon Belasco has reminded us:

> The key to achieving proficiency in speaking is achieving proficiency in listening comprehension.... The day when the average foreign language student overhears a conversation between two or more native speakers and has no difficulty in understanding what is being said is the day when he will be well on the way to developing linguistic competence. To put it simply, one must know in advance–not only what one wants to say–but how one must say it. To say it right, one must learn how to listen.[2]

This observation brings me to my second major point.

2.

Radio is essentially a creative system of technology. Radio is not interchangeable with either the grooved disc or the tape recorder. Yet, this confusion between technological systems has characterized the history of radio in our field.

As indicated, Radio Sweden and a number of other national radios (including the Voice of America) do broadcast elementary language lessons. Methodologically, these programs are eclectic: a mixture of analytical grammar-translation-cum culture and step-increment, habit-formation audiolingualism. As with television, so with radio: most broadcasters to date have assumed that the medium should simply transmit the existing practices of the academy.

If it is carried on simultaneously with the academic course in a language, the radio elementary course can help to develop listening comprehension, especially when the classroom teacher either neglects or is incompetent to speak the language himself. Naturally, it also helps where the learner teaches himself without the aid of other formal instruction. Finally, even where the learner has a good model of linguistic performance available, the radio teacher provides an additional model, allowing the learner to appreciate the diversity of behavior in the foreign language.

Even at more advanced levels, the adjunctive use of radio expands the resources of the learner. In his classes, Felt has used recordings of French radio broadcasts of news reports, interviews, touring information, weather, time, book reviews, plays, songs, advertisements, theatre announcements, stock market reports and quiz programs. For example, from a news item dealing with the plans for Khruschchev's trip to the U.S.A. in 1959, he used

> ...an excerpt of about one minute and a half in length, followed by the same text with pauses. These pauses were not intended for practice in repetition, as with simpler materials, but for mental "rest" periods to facilitate comprehension. I played the master tape over and over during a fifty-minute laboratory period without any introduction or explanation of the content.[3]

Felt then checked comprehension through tests, both aural and written, in both English (translation) and French.

The method is admirable in its stress on listening comprehension. It is a technique for developing comprehension at the outset of what Belasco calls the "postnucleation stage"—nucleation itself being the stage in which the student acquires the ability "to recognize and to pronounce accurately all sounds and combinations of sounds, in isolation and in basic constructions, that a native speaker ever encounters in conducting his daily affairs."[4] Belasco reinforces Felt's experimental results on both theoretical and practical grounds. He warns once more against an undue stress on the "lingual":

> In the initial stage, oral participation on the part of the learner is desirable but not essential. However, it is absolutely crucial that he overhear and understand different kinds of conversations between native speakers—preferably many different speakers. For that reason recorded materials are far more important in the postnucleation stage than in the prenucleation stage.[5]

In stressing the need for a variety of audio models, Belasco implicitly endorses the use of radio, since radio broadcasts are the most accessible and inexpensive source of this variety.

Yet once a broadcast has been committed to tape, as in Felt's method, it has lost one of the great advantages of radio. Radio is free, evanescent voice communication.[6] A student's ability to comprehend the variety and freedom of language over the radio should be the touchstone of his competence. By practice with the radio broadcast heard just once the learner will be able to maintain his competence as both a "receiver" and a "sender." He will also be able to test his progress in both capacities—not only formally in the ways recommended by Felt and Belasco but, also informally on his own.

The student can conduct this kind of self-testing several times a day, on a variety of topics, and with a variety of voice models, especially if he is using short-wave broadcasts. News broadcasts are most useful for this purpose: since major news stories are usually reported in each of the major language communities of the world, the learner can check his understanding of a foreign language report on some event against a broadcast in English about that event or against a newspaper item – either before or after the foreign-language broadcast.

Apart from person-to-person contacts, radio is the most important technological system for students who have relative fluency, and comprehension of a wide range of topics. A great many advanced language students, some of them with experience abroad, find themselves on our college campuses with too few occasions to hear and to speak the foreign language on either a formal or informal basis. Where foreign language clubs exist, the fluent students often find themselves in conversation with beginners and other incompetent speakers and listeners. On the other hand, sending linguistically competent students to the language laboratory to hear prepared materials will stifle their desire to use their language skills creatively.

By means of its relatively unstructured "programs," radio can satisfy this desire. A good, multi-band receiver (short-wave for both international and amateur reception) should be a part of the equipment of every foreign language sequence. A set located in

the language laboratory can be used for a number of purposes both by classes and by individual students. Wherever the radio is located, it should be accessible for casual use by the advanced student to maintain and expand his linguistic competence. Liberated from the formal academic program in this way, radio can become the occasion for students to form a community of radio buffs. Learning about the foreign country through language broadcasts, these radio buffs will find themselves becoming participants in the foreign culture (particularly in its practical aspects) to an extent not possible through literature.

Much of the communication received over short-wave is political. Radio Havana and Radio Moscow, for example, broadcast in Spanish, French, Portuguese, English and other languages, presenting world news in a Communist perspective and offering biased views of the policies of other countries, including the United States. Of course, there is always the opportunity for the student to receive a countervailing point of view in Western broadcasts and to come to his own conclusions. In this way, by making so many points of view available to the student, radio truly helps to create a free man.

However, there are other considerations involved in the pedagogic use of political broadcasts. Many teachers feel that the greater the relevancy of materials to the student's own culture and interests, the greater the impetus to learn. In a discussion of the use of recorded radio materials, Felt asks: "Would not the use of current political topics tend to correlate the language work with the other departments and have the psychological appeal of dealing with the really modern?"[6] My own experience suggests that the answer to this question depends not on the material but on the level at which the material is introduced. In fact, for the early stages of language learning, the more provocative or culturally appealing the material, the less the linguistic incentive. The student becomes so stimulated that he wants to express his opinion with all the powers of articulation at his command. He wants to use his own language. How many teachers have not surrendered to that plea: "Can't I say it in English?" I feel therefore, that provocative materials calling for the expression of opinion by the student are best introduced only at a fairly advanced stage.

The student who can send as well as receive foreign language broadcasts has expanded opportunities (1) to gain knowledge about the foreign country or countries where the language is spoken and (2) to converse in the foreign language with native speakers via short-wave (or with fellow students via amateur broadcasting). This is especially true for American "hams" speaking Spanish or Portuguese or, to a lesser extent, French. It is fairly easy to communicate via short-wave radio with Central and South America and with Canada, and not unduly complicated with respect to other language areas.

Sending is more costly and technically more complicated than receiving. As indicated, a reasonably good commercial receiver is currently available for as little as $100, with more sophisticated apparatus available at higher cost. A reasonably good transmitter for use with foreign countries costs at least that much, and will ordinarily be used by only one student at a time. Nevertheless, schools which find it possible to make a significant investment in a language laboratory should be able to afford the purchase of radio equipment. For sending, of course, licensing requirements must be met. Training at least one teacher in each language to operate the radio equipment will prove to be well worth the cost. Such a teacher can not only record materials along the lines laid out by Felt; he

can also demonstrate radio communication in the foreign language to his advanced classes. A broadcast received can be discussed on the spot by teacher and students during a regular class hour.[7]

4.

Much remains to be done in using radio in foreign language training. It is to be hoped that interested individuals in the foreign language field will now pool their knowledge and energies to form a national organization to further the professional use of radio. At the moment, individuals can do much on their own. At the University of Pennsylvania I succeeded in persuading the local student station to broadcast two half-hour programs in Spanish and two in French each week. In each language, one broadcast presented recorded talk and music from the foreign country; the other presented a live discussion of social, political, or literary topics by resident foreign students and American students or teachers fluent in the foreign language (not always teachers from the foreign language departments). Other schools and colleges can now follow this model at little or no expense. A similar foreign language "network" should be set up on a national scale, using A.M. or F.M. bands. Those interested should write to the author.

FOOTNOTES

1. "The Adaptation of Radio to Foreign Language Teaching," French Review, XXVI (May 1953), 432-438 and "Radio and the Foreign Language Laboratory," French Review, XXXIV (May 1961), 562-566.

2. "Surface Structure and Deep Structure in English," Midway, VIII, No. 2 (Autumn 1967), 112.

3. "Radio and the Foreign Language Laboratory," p. 562.

4. "Surface Structure", p. 117.

5. Ibid., p. 118. For further discussions of these concepts, see Simon Belasco et al. "The Continuum: Listening and Speaking," in Reports of the Working Committees 1963 Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, pp. 3-21, esp. pp. 9-12; also Belasco's "Nucleation and the Audio-Lingual Approach," Modern Language Journal, XLIX, No. 8 (December 1965), pp. 482-491.

6. "The Adaptation of Radio", p. 435.

7. For licensing requirements write to the Federal Communications Commission, Washington, D.C. 20554. I might note here that (1) only citizens can receive a license for a transmitter; (2) there is no age limit (thus, students can become qualified); and (3) qualification entails some knowledge of radio theory and an ability to transmit and receive Morse Code at a rate of thirteen words per minute for the General License. (The Novice Class License, requiring only five words a minute, is good for only one year.)

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Broadcasting Stations of the World, Parts I thru IV (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, U.S. Government Printing Office.) An exhaustive listing of all legally operating broadcast stations in the world: Part I, by city and country; Part II, by frequency; Part III, by call letters and name or slogan; and Part IV, FM and TV stations.

Hertzberg, Robert (WZDJJ), So You Want to Be a Ham, (4th Edition). (Howard W. Sams & Company, Inc., No. 20607, 4300 W. 62nd Street, Indianapolis, Indiana, 46268.) Illustrates modern radio equipment, gives operating procedures, and provides help in passing the FCC examination.

The Radio Amateur's Handbook, 1969, ed. Douglas DeMaw. (Newington, Connecticut.) This is the standard manual of amateur radio communication. Contains a wealth of information on operating techniques, and on receiving and transmitting equipment for short-wave.

Warshauer, Mary Ellen, "Foreign Language Broadcasting," in Joshua A. Fishman, Language Loyalty in the United States (Mouton and Co., The Hague, Netherlands; 1966), 75-91. A detailed discussion of domestic foreign language radio programs.